

INTERVIEW WITH CHIEF OF STAFF OF THE UNITED NATIONS MISSION FOR THE REFERENDUM IN WESTERN SAHARA NICK BIRNBACK

The John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding hosted Nick Birnback at Dartmouth on April 24, 2023. World Outlook staff Adam Tobeck '25, Victor Lago '26, Adam Salzman '24, and Daphna Fineberg '26 conducted an interview with him. The interview was edited for clarity and content.

AT: Hello. And welcome to World Outlook. I'm Adam Tobeck, a '25.

VL: I'm Victor Lago, a '26.

AS: I'm Adam Salzman, a '24.

DF: I'm Daphna Fineberg, a '26.

AT: Today we are honored and excited to be joined by Nick Birnback. Just a little bit of an introduction Nick Birnback has served the United Nations for 25 years, currently as Chief of Staff of MINURSO, the United States mission for the referendum in Western Sahara. Prior to this, he served as chief of Public Affairs for the Department of Peacekeeping Operations in New York and has worked in a number of capacities, both in the field and at headquarters in Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and many others. Mr. Birnback has a BA in International Relations from Tufts University and a master's degree in public policy from Princeton University. So we're very happy to have you here.

NB: Happy to do it.

AT: So I will start off with the first question. As I just said, you serve as MINURSO's Chief of Staff, where you were just a little over a week ago. For those who don't know much about the UN or MINURSO, or are not familiar with the mission, What does your role entail?

NB: Sure. Well, MINURSO itself was established in 1991 to try to facilitate a referendum for the Saharawi people to decide if they wanted to be a part of the Kingdom of Morocco or be independent. We haven't been able to have that referendum and our mission has evolved over the intervening 30 years; now what we do is observe and monitor, report and investigate. We are essentially functioning as a political tripwire for the international community and looking at what could very easily be a regional conflict. So, while the initial function that we were asked to perform all those decades ago has changed, the utility of having peacekeepers in an area that could start a regional conflict is without a doubt an important thing for us to try to continue. As the Chief of Staff, my job is to try to help to manage the mission and all its components.

There's three components to my mission, the force, the mission, support, and the political. I run the political pillar, and our job is to provide our boss good analysis of what's happening on the ground and to make sure that our reporting back to the international community and looking at what could very easily be a regional conflict. So, while the initial function that we were asked to perform all those decades ago has changed, the utility of having peacekeepers in an area that could start a regional conflict is without a doubt an important thing for us to try to continue. As the Chief of Staff, my job is to try to help to manage the mission and all its components. the there's three components to my mission, the force, the mission, support, and the political. I run the political pillar, and our job is to provide our boss good analysis of what's happening on the ground and to make sure that our reporting back to the international community in New York is informed by those data and that analysis.

VL: In the past week, the situation in Sudan between the RAF and the SAF has worsened from a political crisis into violence. This conflict right now has had immediate humanitarian consequences and four UN workers have died. So based on your experience, in these immediate weeks or days, from these crises, how does the UN respond? And also what is the proper role of the UN in trying to solve these crises?

NB: Sure, yeah. I mean, the situation right now in Sudan is unimaginably tragic. The UN system is of course actively engaged on a number of different levels, dealing with the humanitarian crisis to dealing with migration of populations, but also trying to help to negotiate and broker a ceasefire that is durable. And then to move the whole thing back to a situation of dialogue versus a situation of conflict and while it's heart-breaking to watch what's happening in Sudan now and what the UN has consistently done is to call on both sides to immediately stop fighting and go back to the table and start talking about it. You may have seen that the United Nations pushed a convoy today through from Khartoum to port Sudan with some 60 vehicles or thereabouts and to try to make sure that our workers are safe, as you pointed out, there were some casualties and you know, the whole situation remains unimaginably tragic. I know the Secretary General is directly engaged, the head of our mission there is directly engaged and we will continue to do everything we can through political good offices and any other means that we can, to try to help be a part of a peaceful solution to this crisis.

VL: Does the humanitarian necessities like helping the local population with food and hospitals, does that take precedence over trying to mediate the conflict or trying to find maybe a military solution – is that the immediate responsibility of the UN?

NB: Yeah, so I mean, first of all, any decision to take any kind of peace and security driven action would be for the Security Council to decide. The Council is, I believe, having an extraordinary meeting on Sudan tomorrow. The question as to whether we sequence political engagement and humanitarian work is — I really think that they have to be concurrent and not sequential. If we're in a situation that's as immediate

as Sudan, we have to do both. We have to figure out whatever political leverage we can bring to bear on the situation, and to try to promote dialogue to try to promote some form of return to a negotiated settlement instead of the use of violence. But at the same time, the situation has generated dire if not catastrophic, humanitarian consequences, not just for people in Khartoum, and not just for people in Sudan, but increasingly for the whole region. So we have to engage in that and I know that agencies, funds, and programmes of the United Nations are doing just that as we speak.

DF: So, the UN has 193 Member States, obviously, the world's a very big place, and it's definitely difficult to be constantly tracking events in every country. So, what are the issues that are most salient for you and that you particularly like to pay attention to?

NB: Well, the UN sort of breaks into a couple of broad categories. In shorthand, there's the peace and security side, the humanitarian side, the development side, and the individual rights side. I work on the peace and security side, so I tend to track those issues and that's not to suggest that there's a judgmentalism inherent in that, I don't do that because I think they're more important. That's my part of the patch. One of the great advantages of the UN is that the UN deals with the entire panoply of needs based engagement. We have an entire agency called UN Women that deals with that. We've got the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs which deals with that. We have refugees, we have human rights, we have a whole range — World Food Programme and others — a whole range of entities and offices that have been created to try to draw attention to and find solutions for all of the problems that confront current humanity and to do so in a way that is fundamentally cooperative and multilateral. Whether that is burden sharing economically or burden sharing in terms of political engagement, the UN's approach is always collective because our view is that we do a lot better when the entire world is trying to address these problems, rather than letting it be addressed individually or even at a smaller level.

AT: Switching to your prior experiences, I mentioned that you worked in New York. How was the transition from working between missions on the ground and moving to UN Headquarters? And then, what are some lessons that might be learned from those in New York from those on the ground and even vice versa?

NB: That's a great question. I think that in general, the UN is at its best when it is driven by the needs that it confronts in the field. And that's just my opinion. I tend to think that the UN is ultimately an organization that is driven by where the international community can most meaningfully engage to try to make people's lives better. And for that to happen, there needs to be a strong headquarter for sure. But there is something immediately and personally satisfying about working directly in a field-driven organization, and that means that working in the field, you see the direct results of what you're doing, whereas work and headquarters can be a little bit more

indirect even though they both need each other. You can't have a headquarter that oversees work in the field and not have people in the field — and people in the field need a strategic headquarter to look at it. I think we're at our best on some level when we understand the importance of a strong HQ, but that we do fundamentally internalize the idea that we have to be both needs based and field driven.

AS: Thank you for that. You just spoke a lot about the direct results from working in the field. So on that note: a lot of people know about the United Nations and what it does, but they don't really know the practical implications The UN has for their daily life, or that it serves various humanitarian and other capacities. So I'm just wondering: if you had to make the case with a few examples about the material impact of the UN, where did it have a tangible impact? What would you say to that person?

NB: There's a lot of different things. I mean, each bit of the UN system, whether it's peace and security or the humanitarian side or the development side or the rights driven side would undoubtedly argue for their great accomplishments within their own sort of individual paradigm. My sense is that what the UN has done without any argument in my view, over the last 75 years, is provided a single place where the entire international community can get together to discuss the great issues of the day (1) in discussion form and (2) to decide collective courses of action. That's everything from pushing through the environmental statutes, to any of the many rights based things including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to helping resolve conflicts, including in places where UN peacekeepers had to be deployed, to on the development side, trying to make sure that we are not only addressing crises as emergencies, but we're trying to build a sustainability model so that going forward, countries are more resilient and have the possibility of actually addressing themselves and when there's been a tremendous amount of work that's been done there as well. My sense is that ultimately what the UN brings is a collective response to issues that increasingly affect the entire planet. And that the individualized responses are actually quite important too. But driving that through the collective agenda that is in front of the UN through all of its subsidiary organs and bodies, is an approach that if it didn't exist, we'd have to invent it. And my sense is that while the UN is, as all of humanity is, without a doubt, flawed in any number of ways, it still is the great hope of how we collectively can address problems that will be easier to solve for the entire planet pushing it rather than if it's addressed on a on a unilateral basis.

VL: You were just talking about working with the entire planet — when you're working in New York or in Western Sahara, are your co-workers or colleagues, are they from everywhere around the world? Or is it in America, you are working more with Americans?

NB: No, we're from all over. In fact, traditionally, the United States is an underrepresented country in the United Nations. It doesn't mean there aren't a lot of Amer-

icans but the way that that works is you get the number of staff that generally are the amount that you pay, and since the UN pays — the US pays a huge amount of the US budget — there's an expectation that it would thus have more staff. So we're traditionally underrepresented, actually. I work in a small mission in a place called Western Sahara. I'm the Chief of Staff and I'm an American — my boss is the Special Representative of the Secretary General, he's from the Russian Federation. The head of our support side of our mission was born in Rwanda, though she's a naturalized American citizen now; our force commander is from Bangladesh. My deputy is from the United Kingdom. It's one of the great strengths of the UN, when I say it represents the world, it's not intellectual. It's quite, quite practically that. It's not that you only serve all over the world, it's that you get to work with people, from all over the world. And one of the particular satisfactions that I've been fortunate enough to have in my career is that I began working for the UN in Liberia and Sierra Leone, which at the time could compete for the title of worst place in the world. And both those places now deploy forces to United Nations peacekeeping missions. I'm quite proud of having been a part of that.

AS: On that note, I found that the Western Sahara conflict is particularly interesting because it does not get a lot of international news attention. I'm just wondering if you can discuss what's going on in Western Sahara? I know a lot's going on, but very briefly, what's the deal with the Moroccan occupation, the Sahrawis, etc. what are the steps going forward?

NB: I think one has to be really careful about how you characterize the conflict and I certainly wouldn't agree as a MINURSO official with the concept that there's a Moroccan occupation, for example. The conflict was exacerbated in November of 2020, when there was a breakdown in the ceasefire, which had largely held since 1991. Since then, Western Sahara has existed in a state of low intensity conflict with drone strikes occasionally from one side, exchanges of fire and a variety of other things in the situation is, at best, can be quite tense. I'm happy to report that the number of drone strikes over the last couple of months have gone down, and that's a good thing. But nonetheless, as the Secretary General says in his report to the Security Council on this, it is a low intensity conflict — it's a conflict. And that means that all of the ills associated with a conflict are things that we have to address and look at. MINURSO was created to try to do a couple of things: to do demining, to push forward confidence building measures between the parties, and to conduct a referendum. The to decide for the people of Western Sahara whether they wish to be a part of the Kingdom of Morocco or become independent. The referendum hasn't happened. I'm happy to say that demining, which was paused after the breakdown of the ceasefire in November 2020, is likely to resume in the coming weeks. That's a good thing, not just for the for because of the importance for local populations, but removing explosive remnants of war will have long term positive consequences for people that happen to live there. And in terms of confidence building measures, the actual Confidence Building Mea-

asures that we started with had been suspended for a period of time. What the mission does is work with what's called the personal envoy of the secretary general who's a man named Staffan de Mistura, and trying to work with the parties to try to promote political settlement to the crisis under the auspices of a UN-driven project. We just briefed the Security Council last week on this. There have been some developments over the last couple of months that I would characterize as positive. We certainly hope that those continue, hope that the low intensity conflict continues to pause, gratified that the number of drone strikes has reduced, and trust that we will continue to be allowed to execute the important functions that we have contributing to peace and stability in the entire region.

AT: Thank you, I think turning to, again, some of your prior experience, I think you were spokesperson for the UN Mission in East Timor. I'm curious about how this role fits into the hierarchy at the mission and what sorts of challenges you might have faced communicating the UN's message or maybe interacting and interfacing with stakeholders on the ground. What does being a spokesperson entail that might be different from the special representative?

NB: So the communications architecture that a public information/public affairs person is responsible for varies from mission to mission quite dramatically. In Western Sahara, where I work now, there isn't a whole lot of public diplomacy. We do quite a bit behind the scenes with the parties, but we try as much as we can to avoid making a great deal of public pronouncements. That's not necessarily the case in other missions, where we have a more robust communications profile. Thinking about our mission Central African Republic, but you could have just as easily said Mali as well, and others too. And in Western Sahara. It's not the role of MINURSO, or our mission to push public diplomacy. Our role is to report and to advise and to try to create better analysis for decision makers and things like that. So we try to avoid having a public profile, but we do find ways using our social media platforms for example, to tell stories of people, individual stories of people working within the MINURSO context to show what it is that they're doing. So we try to do a lot of image driven storytelling there about people. And when I say people, I mean those that work for us, not local populations. That's dramatically different in other missions. In other missions, frequently we will talk about impact tangibly on the ground. We'll cover quick impact projects that mission might be undertaking; we'll focus on local populations and tell their stories as well. It has to be calibrated based on this particular mission that you're in. The one commonality that I think I would phrase though having fairly recently been in headquarters working in a communications capacity before I took this position, is the importance of making sure that you are engaging in the digital space. We don't for example, in MINURSO, we try to avoid being news-driven. That's not our role. You will find a Twitter feed for us that talks about what we think about latest developments; that's not what we do. But what you will find is a brand new Instagram account that we just launched. That has some nice pictures on it, that has good stories

on it ,that has reels; you'll find a new Flickr gallery that we just put up. Likewise, image driven. You will find a website that's been recently, dramatically revamped and that has fresh content on it that highlights what it is that we do there on the ground, and that tries to continuously make the point of how important our mission is, in terms of observing, monitoring, reporting, and investigating but also promoting security not just in the territory of Western Sahara, but in the entire region.

AT: Thank you. I think turning to the more domestic side, there's maybe growing but definitely salient isolationist tendencies or blocks and the United States that don't necessarily believe that we should be participating on the global stage, who sort of lack confidence in the UN. We pulled out the World Health Organization, under the Trump administration. I'm curious about misconceptions that maybe you have seen about the United Nations. What should people know that they don't already and if you want to have an opportunity to push back at some of the wrong ideas that might be out there?

NB: I'm actually reasonably optimistic about this issue. My experience is that every country goes through revolutions and how they think about multilateral bodies, and that's up to them. How, and if you participate in international organizations is ultimately a sovereign decision and we fully respect that. Having said that, my personal opinion is that a strong and robust United Nations is in the United States' interest. That's my opinion. I'd point out that the United States pays a huge percentage of the UN's budget and an even higher percentage of the UN peacekeeping budget. We have American officials leading major parts of the UN organizations, special funds, and programmes. In my mission we have not just not just me as the Chief of Staff, but indeed the Force Chief of Staff as a full American colonel serving there as well. The Americans have been super engaged on that file. My sense is that in general, for what it's worth, again, my personal opinion is that the American system flourishes in an atmosphere of stability and predictability and a rules-based approach to how we engage with the rest of the planet. And I think that the United Nations plays an important role in promoting just that. So I would argue that a strong UN which was not just founded in the United States, but has always been affiliated with, identified with the US, is in Americans' interest and in the interest of the American policy establishment, regardless of what party they come from. I'm optimistic that that will continue to be the case, regardless of whether or not the administration is of one party or the other.

VL: You've obviously had a career abroad, in East Timor, Western Sahara, all over the world. I was wondering if you could speak on if somebody's interested in a career abroad, what that entails, the cultural differences, what the new life is like.

NB: Yeah, I mean, I think I've been incredibly fortunate. I've sort of been in the UN for a really long time now, for over 25 years. I've been incredibly fortunate to have the experiences that I've had. In many ways, my most memorable experiences have

all been overseas and all been in places that I've been deployed, like Liberia or Sierra Leone and Timor, Bosnia and Eritrea, Somalia. Being able to be a part of the tangible demonstration of the international community, trying to make things better is inspiring. I mean, we work for an organization, we in the UN, we work for an organization that's purposed, purpose-driven, but also promotes international norms, standards, and fairness, and any number of things that I think you know, really motivated me. I am conscious of being incredibly lucky and privileged to have been able to work in all of these contexts and sure, like anything it has its frustrations; you're far from home and you miss family members and things like that. But on the other hand, it is also a really remarkable career and a remarkable opportunity to try to make a difference tangibly, and not just to not just to talk about it, but to actually be doing it. So I consider myself incredibly fortunate.

AT: We've mentioned that you've served in the UN system for 25 years and the vast majority of that was peacekeeping, security operations. So I'm curious how you have seen peacekeeping, peacekeeping change over your career at the UN, and how you anticipate it might change in the future. Maybe the situations in which the Security Council authorizes action, where it hasn't, what you've seen over your time.

NB: It's a good question and one that I think about quite a bit. Peacekeeping missions are a product of the Security Council. And when the Security Council is divided and polarized as unfortunately it is many times right now, many of our files the Council can't really seem to agree on a lot right now. When that's the case, then it affects how we do what we do and it affects our ability to engage. We are only as good as our political masters. That's kind of like a truism for us. My sense is that the Council understands the relevance of peacekeeping. We still are a big chunk of the UN's budget, they understand how important it is to have that tangible demonstration not just of the commitment of the international community, but from all over the world, so that when you go to a peacekeeping mission, and you see troops from across an ocean engaging in a conflict — that that sends the message that the entire world and that then the international community, as reflected through the UN, has made a decision to do that. That manifestation sends a clear and unambiguous signal. But I think that for the council, everything is part of the same equation. And so when the relations between, for example the permanent members, are difficult for a variety of reasons, it reflects on their ability to not just make decisions but to be tangible about those decisions, for them to approve new missions or what have you. I think that in peacekeeping itself, the trend right now is towards smaller missions, not large, generally infantry-driven missions that we've had previously. Sometimes this gets called 'boutique missions,' but there are a couple of things that are reasonably consistent through them. An intention towards protection of civilians' issues, for example, is something that you see in most mandates now that you didn't previously. That's important, but I think that peacekeeping is in a constant state of evolution. And in a constant state of trying to be innovative and to make sure that all of our missions are not cookie cut-

ter — that we don't say because something worked in Mali, it'll work in the Central African Republic. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, we had something called the Forced Intervention Brigade, which had a separate mandate, a more offensive mandate to go after armed groups that were destabilizing Eastern Congo — only for that mission. In the Central African Republic, we had something called the urgent temporary measures, which were only for that mission, which gave us essentially executive authority, powers of arrest and things like that. In Mali, we have a combat convoy escort company that was deployed only for Mali that escorts our supply convoys from one particularly dangerous place to another because they were constantly getting hit. All of those are operational approaches to addressing specific problems in an individualized context. And to me, that's an example of peacekeeping kind of at its best — how each mission has its own peculiarities, but also its own problems that need to be addressed, and we should, at our best, create these individualized fit for purpose solutions to address those problems instead of looking at it as a whole. I think that there's an understanding now in the UN peacekeeping community that that's the future: increasingly fit for purpose missions that address specific aspects of a process and that don't try to do absolutely everything.

DF: And just kind of to wrap up, do you have any advice for anyone going into any careers with government diplomacy and specifically, being in the field versus being at the headquarters seeing as you've done both?

NB: Learn foreign languages is the first thing. My experience has been that it's very easy in the United States to get by speaking just one language. Maybe that's not true in certain places in the United States, but it's my experience and as soon as you leave our borders that diminishes. The expectation of you being able to communicate in a range of languages is one thing I would flag to people considering a career. Another is, there is in my opinion, no substitute for field work. That working at headquarters is necessary and useful. But being out on the ground where the needs are the greatest and being able to see the tangible manifestation of and the impact of what you're doing brings a level of satisfaction that I think is something that I would flag to any young person thinking about going into this field of work. It's great to be at a strategic headquarters, the work of the United Nations and of the multilateral system it represents is in the field and is driven by the needs of the field. So being a part of that, particularly when you're young is, in my opinion, indispensable.

AT: Thank you. We've loved having you here, and we really appreciate your time, Mr. Birnback.

NB: Thank you. It's been my pleasure.